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The witty Briton stands up to the European bully. How a populist myth helped the British Eurosceptics to win the 2016 EU referendum.

Le Britannique plein d'esprit résiste au tyran européen. Comment un mythe populiste a aidé les eurosceptiques britanniques à remporter le référendum de 2016 sur l'UE

Abstract

The British press has been reporting a uniquely distorted image of European affairs and institutions for decades. This article argues that the twisted narrative some British media offered about the relationship between the United Kingdom and mainland Europe was as influential as were the discursive strategies which they employed. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate three sample texts, and drawing on Jack Lule's and Roland Barthes' theories of myth, I find that two of these texts construct a populist myth of a witty British people eternally alien to the EU. This narrative ultimately contributed to the vote for Brexit.

Abstract

La presse britannique rapporte depuis des décennies une image déformée des affaires et des institutions européennes. Cet article affirme que la narration tordue proposée par certains médias britanniques à propos de la relation entre le Royaume-Uni et l'Europe continentale a eu autant d'influence que les stratégies discursives qu'ils ont utilisées pendant la campagne. En analysant trois exemples du point de vue du Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), et en s'inspirant des théories du mythe de Jack Lule et Roland Barthes, je trouve que deux de ces textes analysés construisent un mythe populiste d'un peuple britannique plein d'esprit, éternel étranger à l'UE. Cette narration a finalement contribué au vote pour le Brexit.

Introduction

On Wednesday, 11th May 2016, the official pro-Brexit campaign Vote Leave launched their so-called 'battle bus' which boasted the slogan: "We send the EU £350 million a week – let's fund our NHS instead". On the very same day, Vote Leave-figurehead Boris Johnson admitted that the British government in fact paid less than £350m a week into the EU budget (itv, 2016). Johnson's opponents, too, immediately exposed the slogan as a lie (Left Foot Forward, 2016; Glaze and Bloom, 2016). Even before Vote Leave sent their bus on tour, the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot, had clarified twice that the figure of £350m weekly payments to the EU, which Vote Leave had previously used in its campaign literature, was incorrect.[1] However, the falsehood of the claim, which was plain to see for everybody, did not stop it being used on the battle bus which was to become iconic for the Brexit campaign.

As shocking as the blatant lies and the callous disregard for any corrections seemed during the run-up to the British EU referendum (see, e.g., Freedland, 2016), falsehood has a long history in British media coverage of the EU. For decades, especially the right-wing British press has been notoriously reporting a uniquely distorted image of European affairs and institutions (see, e.g., Wilkes and Wring, 1998; Steele and Kettle, 2002; Seaton, 2016). British newspapers seem to engage more in disinformation about the European Union – or its predecessor, the European Economic Community – than the media of any other European country (Morgan, 1995; Lloyd and Marconi, 2014; Seaton, 2016). In 1992, the Representation of the European Commission in the UK began to collect British newspaper

[1] Letter by Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, to the Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP, 21 April 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Letter-from-Sir-Andrew-Dilnot-to-Norman-Lamb-MP-210416.pdf, and letter by Sir Andrew Dilnot, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, to Dominic Cummings, Vote Leave, 10 May 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Letter-from-Sir-Andrew-Dilnot-to-Mr-Cummings-10-May-2016-.pdf.

stories containing disputed facts, such as the alleged ban of bent bananas or of prawn cocktail-flavoured crisps, to document the misreporting. In addition, the EC published an online blog of what they called "Euromyths", where it listed alphabetically the issues which, according to the Commission, the British press had misrepresented[2].

During two and a half decades, the Commission fact-checked the British coverage of European policies and regulations and published detailed corrections. However, their efforts remained largely futile. Not only did the same Euromyths reappear despite repeated rebuttals by the Commission[3] and regular confutations in some mainstream media (e.g., *BBC* 2007; *Sky News*, 2014; Lyons, 2016; Smith, 2017), some Euromyths also eventually contributed to the argument for Brexit (e.g., Johnson, 2016[4]) and resurfaced in targeted adverts by the official campaign group Vote Leave, which the social media platform Facebook eventually disclosed to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee in July

[2] https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/euromyths-a-z-index/

[3] For instance, the alleged ban on curved cucumbers which the Commission refuted in May 1993 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/ec-to-ban-curved-cucumbers/) and in March 1998 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/straight-cucumbers/); equally the notorious distortion that the EU banned bent bananas was refuted on the Commission's *Euromyths* blog in 1994 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/bananas-and-brussels/) and 1998 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/curved-bananas/); the claim that the EU was about to ban the British double decker bus was rebutted by the Commission in January 1995 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/eu-safety-rules-will-dispose-of-london-double-decker/) and April 1998 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/double-decker-buses-to-be-banned/).

[4] Johnson mentions the claim that the size of condoms were harmonised – refuted by the European Commission in 1994 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/eu-to-push-for-standard-condom-size/) and 2000 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/condom-dimensions-to-be-harmonised/) – and that Brussels wanted to ban British prawn cocktail flavoured crisps - disputed by the Commission in 1993 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/ec-to-ban-prawn-cocktail-crips/).

2018[5]. In fact, when Boris Johnson launched the Vote Leave campaign bus, he did so by repeating some of the notorious Euromyths.[6]

Thus, Euromyths proved powerful in shaping how the EU was narrated in British political discourse over decades. Nevertheless, British voters never showed much interest in Europe or the EU as an election issue. For instance, in 2005 just two per cent of voters named Europe or the Euro as the most important issue facing the country (Whiteley et al., 2005, 810). Even ten years later, ahead of the general election 2015, and two years after David Cameron had delivered his Bloomberg speech promising an EU referendum if he were to win a majority, just 11 per cent of voters considered Europe or the EU the most important electoral issue (Ipsos Mori, 2014). In Britain, the EU remained for many years less a contested than a neglected topic. This opened a void that allowed marginal narratives of the EU to take centre stage. The Euromyths emerged from often silly news stories and took hold against continuing attempts to expose their untruths, shaping the narrative of Europe and the EU that was used in the Leave campaign. Euromyths are an important case study because they affected how the EU was narrated by those who wanted to leave.

This article argues that Euromyths not only established lies about the EU in the mainstream British press, but also, more fundamentally, undermined the democratic function

[5] Facebook released the ads Vote Leave used for its targeted advertising campaign to the DCMS (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) Committee in a document of 101 pages, containing photos from the ads. Two of the ads which are displayed on these pages used Euromyths: the claim that the EU wants to ban tea kettles (Vote Leave/50 Million Ads, 2018, p. 38), refuted by the European Commission in 2016 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/ec-has-not-decided-to-regulate-toasters-and-kettles-and-could-not-decide-alone-anyway/); the other ad states that "The European Union wants to kill our cuppa" – which could again refer to the alleged ban of tea kettles, or to an earlier claim that Brussels wanted to ban tea-making machines ("teasmades") at the bedside, refuted by the Commission in February 2002 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/teasmades-go-off-the-boil-thanks-to-brussels/).

[6] Video in *Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/11/boris-johnson-began-his-vote-leave-campaign-on-bus-made-in-germa/; accessed 15.5.2019. Johnson says (starting 1'07"): "It is absolutely crazy, absolutely crazy that the European Union is telling us how powerful our vacuum cleaners have got to be, what shape our bananas have got to be, and all that kind of thing…". Both claims were disputed by the European Commission, see https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/media-reporting-on-vacuum-cleaners-don%E2%80%99t-get-sucked-in/ and https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/bananas-and-brussels/.

of political journalism and consequently of political debate. The silliness of the Euromyths is deceptive. It hides the destructive power of mythical stories, as constructed by the Euromyths, to thwart democratic dispute. When Johnson repeats the false claims about alleged EU regulation in front of his campaign bus painted with a false statement, his words are met by chuckles from the audience. As in this instance, the lies were often not contested or even examined. Instead, as I will argue, they undermined the debate because they presented a narrative of Britain and the EU that appeared unchallengeable.

I contend that the Euromyths continued to persuade because they did not just tell lies but, most significantly, created a myth which used the populist dichotomy, as defined by Mudde, of "two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'" (2004, 543). The populist dichotomy helped the Euromyths to become powerful. Their falsehood proved to be irrelevant.

The Euromyths as news stories

The Euromyths are situated within the context of a specific journalistic genre: the news story. The Euromyths are institutionally marked as news, as they are published on the news pages of daily or weekly newspapers; in some instances, their news character is even highlighted through a pointer to the related comment. They are also marked as news linguistically, as I will discuss in a moment.

The news context, in which the Euromyths are placed, evokes a certain "genre knowledge" (Baxter, 2011, 17). News stories are expected to fulfill a crucial informative role within society. It is widely accepted that, in order to thrive, democracies need an accurately informed public (see, e.g., Tuchman, 1978, ix; Green & Donahue, 2018, 109; Weeks, 2018, 140). Functioning democracies require citizens who learn about political, economic, and

social facts, citizens who form and exchange opinions on the basis of what they learned, and who decide their political actions accordingly. News media are seen as the essential providers of correct information in this ideal model (Chadwick, Vaccari, and O'Loughlin, 2018, 4256). News stories, at least in the Western model, have been shaped by the objectivity norm of American journalism (Schudson and Anderson, 2009). As Tuchman (1972) has shown, the claim on objectivity fulfills the social role to keep news institutions out of trouble: "Attacked for a controversial presentation of 'facts,' newspapermen invoke their objectivity almost the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits" (660).

Based on field studies in news rooms and interviews with news reporters, Tuchman demonstrates that journalistic 'objectivity' is constructed through specific social and linguistic practices, what she calls a "strategic ritual" (661). She identifies four "procedures" (ibid.) of objectivity: "presenting conflicting possibilities" (667); providing evidence in the form of "facts" that are deemed by reporters to "speak for themselves" (ibid.); offering quotes through which "the reporter may remove his opinions from the story by getting others to say what he himself thinks" (668); and structuring a news story like an "inverted pyramid", which means that reporters put first what they consider the most important information (670). Tuchman points out that "such procedures may provide demonstrable evidence of an attempt to obtain objectivity, they cannot be said to provide objectivity" (676). Instead, they fulfil the function to protect news reporters against criticism (ibid.).

Tuchman's procedures of objectivity, such as the "inverted pyramid", are well-established practices in professional journalism, constituting the genre of news stories. As practices they get recontextualized within academic texts about news writing and objectivity (see, e.g., Franklin et al., 2005, 122; Harcup, 2009, 81–92; Smith, 2007, 106), which in turn are recontextualized within journalism schools within the teaching of news writing. The

academic practices of teaching Tuchman's "ritual strategies" of objectivity thus conform to what Fairclough describes as "genres of governance": they recontextualize a journalistic practice of writing a news story within news room rules, which are in turn recontextualized within the teaching of journalism, thus "governing the way things are done" (2003, 32–33).[7]

As we will see, the Euromyths, are placed within this context only to disrupt it. This article intends to show how, by hijacking the news genre with a populist myth, the Euromyths gravely harmed the public debate of European affairs in Britain.

News stories as myths

News stories have been discussed as mythical narratives for some time (e.g. Bird and Dardenne, 1988; Lule, 2001; Nossek and Berkowitz, 2006; Kelsey, 2015, 2017). For the analysis of the Euromyths two theories of myth are relevant. The first, following Lule, considers myth as the narrative form of news stories. Prompted by his own experience as a practising reporter, Lule contends that news is not just information but "primarily a form of storytelling" (2001, 13), which he identifies as myth. News stories, according to Lule, "offer sacred, societal narratives with shared values and beliefs, with lessons and themes, and with exemplary models that instruct and inform" (18). Lule traces a number of mythical archetypes (such as hero, trickster, good mother, or flood) in news reports in the *New York Times*.

The second aspect of myth looks at what Kelsey identified as the "key function of myth": the "construction or deliverance of a concept, sign or archetype that appears as

[7] Fairclough, of course, uses the example of management education, not of journalism training (2003, 33).

common sense" (2015, 7). Similar to Kelsey[8], I will use Roland Barthes' theory of myth as a "*second-order semiological system*" (2013, 223) to explore how the Euromyths are not only telling (news) stories of a specific mythical archetype, but then, in a second step, transform these archetypal stories into a populist myth of an eternal, "natural" antagonism between Britain and the EU.

Data and Methodology

For this article I will consider three Euromyths news stories published in 1993 and 1994. The first two texts exemplify two long-lasting Euromyths, which – despite being proven wrong by the EC – reappeared in many news stories over the years and eventually in Leave campaigners' line of reasoning. The third text illustrates the importance of linguistic strategies as it represents a differently narrated Euromyths that proved to be less persuasive.

The three news stories were manually selected from the physical archive of Euromyths newspaper clippings and photocopies, held at the Representation of the European Commission in the UK. The Euromyths told in these three articles are also referred to – and refuted – on the European Commission's Euromyth blog, which lists 679 alphabetically sorted keyword entries to so-called Euromyths, 256 of which are duplicates, where the same hyperlink is associated with different key words. The entries start in October 1992 and end in January 2017. The blog posts relevant to the three news stories studied here are found under the keywords 'Cucumbers'[9], 'Condoms, testing of'[10], and 'Steam trains, drivers'[11].

[8] Kelsey (2015) draws on Lule (2001), Barthes (2013), and Flood (2002) to develop his own analytical method of Discourse Mythological Analysis (DMA). Despite striking similarities between his approach and mine, there are also marked differences. Most notably, I use Lule's and Barthes' theories in a sequential two-step analysis, as I understand Lule's theory to apply to news stories on the textual level, whereas Barthes' concept of myth helps understand the linguistic strategy of the Euromyths.

[9] https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/ec-to-ban-curved-cucumbers/

[10] https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/eu-to-push-for-standard-condom-size/

[11] https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/euromyths-and-misunderstandings-brussels-to-derail-steam-trains/

The Euromyths are situated in the historical-political context of the Maastricht Treaty negotiations during the early 1990s. The rancorous British debate of its highly controversial ratification has been seen as a turning and starting point for the growing hostility against the EU within the Conservative party (Young, 1998; Gifford, 2006; Shrimsley, 2018), which ultimately led to the referendum in June 2016 and to the vote for the UK to leave the EU. The adversarial nature of British politics, which tends to divide power between two main parties and marginalizes others, as well as the resulting factional nature of Euroscepticism within these parties have been observed as particular for the liberal democratic order in Britain (Aspinwall, 2000; Usherwood, 2002).

I will adapt Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA), which aims to research "the particular significance of semiosis, and of dialectical relations between semiosis and other social elements, in the social processes […] under investigation" (2016, 90). I will utilize Fairclough's approach to investigate linguistic strategies in the three sample texts in relation to the sketched political context. My "object of research" (Fairclough, 2016, 98) is the semiotic realization of strategies in this acrimonious political discourse, where "discourse", following Fairclough, refers to the semiotic practices of a social domain (2016, 88). The "social wrong" (98) upon which I will focus is the persisting disinformation in the British media coverage of the EU. The literature on "fake news" distinguishes between misinformation, as the inadvertent spreading of falsehoods, and disinformation, as the deliberate attempt to deceive (see, e.g., Southwell, Thorson, & Sheble, 2018, 3). The Euromyths fall into the latter.

The two above mentioned theories of myth, on which I will draw for this article, are relevant on two analytical levels. Firstly, Lule's archetypal mythical tales are enacted on the level of the "semiotic dimension of events", the text (Fairclough, 2016, 89). The three sample texts which I will analyse belong to the genre of news stories and thus follow specific

"semiotic ways of of acting and interacting" (88). In the case of news, this includes telling stories which, following Lule, can be described as mythical tales. They fulfil the important function of engaging readers emotionally. As Kranert puts it: "the reference to myths facilitates an emotional connection with the audience, and a discourse invoking these myths can link the political reality it construes to the private experience of the participants" (2018, 6).

Secondly, Roland Barthes's theory of "*myth as a type of speech*" (2013, 217), as I will argue in this article, can help explain why the Euromyths persisted despite their falsehood. Barthes understands myth as "a system of communication", a "message" (ibid.) that sits on top of language as a "*second-order semiological system*" (223). The language sign, which – as described in Saussure's semiology – brings together a signifier (the image) and a signified (the concept), turns itself into a signifier on the second, the mythical level (ibid.). Barthes offers the by now famous example of a photo in *Paris Match* which shows a black man in a French uniform who salutes. On the literal level of language this photo means just a black soldier who salutes; on the level of myth, though, the photo of the black saluting soldier signifies the concept "that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag" (225). The myth only becomes apparent when the "meaning" – a black man gives the French salute – retreats and turns into the "form" for a "concept" which is motivated by an ideology – French imperiality in Barthes' example (226–228). Barthes' myth has an ideological purpose in a political context: "The concept closely corresponds to a function, and it is defined by a tendency" (229). What creates the myth is the analogy between meaning and concept (237).

Analysis

Laughing against Maastricht – the alleged ban of curved cucumbers

The first sample text this article will analyse was published in the *Daily Mail* on 7 May 1993 (p. 9) with the headline "Brussels sprouts the curve-free cucumber". The article is identified as a news report, as opposed to comment, as the referral to a related comment at the end of the text clarifies. However, the language of this text only partially fits into this genre, as we will see.

The claim that Brussels demands cucumbers to be grown without a curve counts, like the even more notorious alleged ban on bent bananas[12], among the earliest and most persistent Euromyths. The European Commission rejected the claim by clarifying that it simply regulated for common quality standards of fruit and vegetables to facilitate trade.[13] The alleged prohibition of curved cucumbers does not exist. Still, the Euromyth, which maintains the claimed ban, survived beyond the EU referendum on 23 June 2016 and was, the day after the referendum, listed on *Mail Online* among those supposed EU laws to which the vote allegedly had called an end.[14]

In the selected sample text, two textual elements stand out. The first refers to the use of the identity category "we" in the first sentence of the article: "We laughed when they tried to ban prawn-flavoured crisps and the green colouring in mushy peas." An agent referred to in the first person plural addresses – and includes – the audience. The text thus assumes an, albeit only vaguely defined, collective: the "we" in the first sentence surmises a shared identity of author and reader, which suggests a shared attitude (the shared laugh), but remains

[12] The European Commission published twice a refutation of the 'bent bananas' Euromyths on their dedicated website, in 1994 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/bananas-and-brussels/) and in 1998 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/curved-bananas/).
[13] https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/quality-standards-for-apples/
[14] "Bonfire of the EU laws: From crooked cucumbers to powerful vacuum cleaners, the barmy Brussels regulations we now can get rid of." *Mail Online*, 24 June 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3658811/Barmy-Brussels-regulations-UK-leaves-EU-referendum-result.html

unspecific about which group exactly is included. It constructs a difference to an equally ill-defined group of "they", which is explained as "Eurocrats" in the second sentence. In semiotic terms, the use of the identity category "we" is a "*personal deixis"* (Fairclough, 2016, 101), which positions the author (named in the byline as Richard Pendlebury) within the group of his audience.

This moment of personal deixis breaks the rules of the genre of news reporting, which, as we have seen, is enacted by following Tuchman's strategic rituals of objectivity. Standard British news writing, employing the "inverted pyramid" structure, "places the most important information at the head of the story and uses the lead paragraph to answer the five 'W questions': Who? What? Why? Where? And When?" (Franklin et al., 2005, 122). Significantly, the first sentence in this news story interrupts the public discourse of the news genre with an informal, conversational discourse. As Fairclough observes: "conversational discourse has been and is being projected from its primary domain, in the personal interactions of the private sphere, into the public sphere. Conversation is colonizing the media" (1992, 204). Fairclough interprets this "tendency towards informality" to be associated with a "tendency to eliminate overt power markers" (ibid.). The informal discourse in the cucumber story constructs a commonality between author and audience which is intended to undermine the power of the EU.

The second outstanding textual feature is the wording (see Fairclough, 1992, 190–192). The choice of words belongs to an informal style (Fairclough, 2016, 89) of private interaction, which colonizes the public sphere of the news genre. Four times comical words are chosen, some of which add sexual innuendo to the comical effect. Within the first two paragraphs following the intro the allegedly outlawed deformation of cucumbers is dubbed "kinks", the surmised ban will not allow them "to droop". The deformation of the cucumbers is described as "vegetably incorrect" (an obvious pun on "politically incorrect"). Later on, in

the seventh paragraph, the word “kinky” is repeated. The eleventh paragraph also offers a comical image (“Ministry of Agriculture inspectors, stalking New Covent Garden, tape measures at the ready”). As before, the comical wording colonises the news genre, introducing an informal into the public discourse.

The recontextualization (Fairclough, 2016, 89) of an amused conversation about a shared view between author and reader into a news story is echoed by the words chosen to mark the reaction by British people to the alleged ban. The measure is met by “ridicule from Britain’s £44million cucumber industry”, by “amused contempt” from cucumber growers “in deepest Essex”, and the question “‘Am I allowed to laugh?’” by one directly quoted grower. It is also claimed that the controversial ban would have been appreciated by the popular comedian Frankie Howerd (who had died just about a year before the publication of this article). The “We” which starts the article supposes a commonality between author and reader which is constructed as a shared amusement (“We laughed […]”). The author-reader-group’s shared laughter is repeated by the hilarity expressed by representatives of the British people (the British cucumber industry, the cucumber growers in Essex, and the two quoted growers). Through their shared amusement author, reader, and ‘the British people’ are constructed as a collective ‘we’ that implies an opposed ‘they’, named as the “European Commission” (whose “agriculture spokesman” is quoted), as “Brussels”, and in a quote by a representative of the cucumber growers, as “[b]ureaucrats”. It is “we”, the ‘British people’, who laugh about what “they”, the ‘Eurocrats’, have come up with.

The ‘British people’ are further defined through a “£44million cucumber industry” with a production of “90,000 tons a year, mostly for UK consumption” – which signals (economic) strength as well as self-reliance. ‘Britishness’ is also established in contrast to “tough Dutch and Spanish competition”. The contrast marks the British produce as “wonkier” than the Dutch. A quote from the managing director of a British vegetable wholesaler

describes the producers as individual, hard-working, self-reliant and independent people ("families, not co-operatives, with a small acreage, getting up early in the morning and picking the cucumbers themselves"), who – in contrast to "the Dutch or other foreign growers" – are not helped by EU subsidies.

The issue of the alleged ban on curved cucumbers is placed "amid the furore over Maastricht", therefore making the connection to the bitter debates over the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. The argument is taken up by a quote from a representative of "the Right-wing [sic] think-tank the Adam Smith Institute", who is attributed with having uncovered the alleged regulation. He is quoted with the claim that the supposed ban endangers the "whole European ideal" and ends the "free market". The pointer to Maastricht and the think-tank quote link the assumed cucumber directive to the essential political debate on the EU of the day. At the same time an "agriculture spokesman" for the European Commission is quoted with a correction, if a qualified one ("It is still ok to sell curved cucumbers – but that may be subject to modification."). Providing quotes through which "the reporter may remove his opinions from the story by getting others to say what he himself thinks" (Tuchman, 2013, 668) is another ritual of objectivity marking the news genre. However, all quotes from British cucumber growers reacting to the alleged ban are marked with a modality of "low affinity" (Fairclough, 1992, 159), where the degree of affinity expresses to what extent the speakers are certain of the facts on which they comment. Low affinity thus signals that the factual basis for their comments is doubtful ("sounds like", "seems to be", "a spokesman said he was surprised", "could make"). The claim to report objectively "the facts" through quotes is undermined as the quotes are built on uncertainty. The ritual of objectivity appears as empty gesture.

The news story is narrated as the story of two opponents: an amused, witty, and defiant people stands up against a stupid, bullying organisation. This is a variation of the

archetypal Hero myth that Lule identified (2001, 82). Kelsey (2017) demonstrates how UKIP leader Nigel Farage's campaign for Brexit is narrated as a populist hero myth, discursively constructing Farage as "underdog […] fighting against the establishment" (54). In our case, the hero is represented not by an individual but by a people who draw on their wit and resilience to resist against an oppressing power. Heroes, Lule notes, "serve as exemplary models […] for qualities that an individual society prizes" (ibid.). This is exactly what humour represents for English society and Englishness, as Kate Fox observes: "Humour rules. Humour governs. Humour is omnipresent and omnipotent." (2004, 61). As the archetypal story of the witty, defiant Brit who stands up against an unfunny, bullying European Commission this news story creates a myth that "facilitates an emotional connection with the audience" (Kranert, 2018, 6) which trumps the mere information contained in the reported (or alleged) facts (Lule, 2001, 188).

However, myth achieves even more in this text if understood, with Barthes, as a second-order semiological system. The 'meaning' of the British Hero myth reverts to the 'form' for the 'concept' of 'British identity which is alien and superior to the EU'. It creates this myth, as described by Barthes, through analogy (2013, 237). The story of the funny British Hero standing up against the humourless European Commission corresponds to the notion of deep and natural alienness between Britain and the EU and the implication of equally natural superiority of the British people.

Sexualised banter ridiculing Europe – the allegedly restricted condoms

The second sample text this article will analyse was published in the *Daily Star* on 28 October 1994 ("Euro Squeezed", p. 15) among a mixture of 'news in brief', covering the dispute around the removal of a life-size bull-statue from a restaurant in New York, and the

disorderly behaviour of a drunken man. The news story about the "5 inch EC condom" is marked as an "exclusive", despite the issue being reported widely at the time, not only in the British press.

The alleged EC regulation of the size of condoms is another long-lasting Euromyths. On the dedicated website of the European Commission it was refuted twice as plain wrong (common standards, the EC clarifies, refer only to quality, not size, and are voluntary)[15], but nevertheless it kept being repeated until the Brexit referendum when it was cited by Boris Johnson in his *Telegraph* column among the "occasionally comical" "efforts at harmonisation" he reported when still a Brussels correspondent in the late 1980s (Johnson, 2016).

In contrast to the previously analysed article this text appears to enact the rules of the the news story genre: it uses the inverted pyramid; it reports in the "categorical modality" of present tense (Fairclough, 1992, 159) and the related present perfect, thus signalling factuality; the agents are the subjects of the report, not a conversational "we" group; there are quotes from both sides – the British Medical Association and representatives of the European Parliament and the European Commission.

However, as in the cucumber-article, this text again selects words with a comic effect. In a number of puns, the topics of size and sexuality are linked to nationality and strength, alluding to castration and impotence on one side, and virility on the other. The "Eurocrats" are "cut down to size" (castration image); the standardized shorter condoms are "obviously to suit its smaller member countries" (pun of "member" for penis, the smallness alluding to

[15] 1994 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/eu-to-push-for-standard-condom-size/) and 2000 (https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/condom-dimensions-to-be-harmonised/).

penis size); “Eurocrats” are “short of the mark”. The “British manhood”, on the other hand, was “under-estimat[ed]” by the “Eurocrats” (allusion to virility).

The comical word choice thus constructs a national competition in which the European Commission and its officials are framed as weak, unpleasant, and the target of a joke: the “Eurocrats” are also “Europrats”; an “EC official” is quoted with sexualised language (“We realise the issue will arouse a lot of passion.”); the name of the Dutch prime minister is made into a pun for a slang word for penis (Kok, cock). The Britons, on the other hand, are linked to the rational voice of adequate measurements (the British Medical Association is quoted with criticism of too small sizes allegedly prescribed by the European Commission).

The text, again, constructs two antagonistic groups. The British people are the omitted agent in the sentence: “They [= the “Eurocrats”]’ve been told a crackpot scheme to standardise the the size of EC condoms – obviously to suit its smaller member countries – is an insult to thousands of Brits.” As Fairclough discusses, the obfuscation of the agent in a passive clause can have a “political or ideological reason” (1992, 182). In the present case, though, this reason is not to hide “causality and [hence] responsibility” (ibd.), but on the contrary to lend the accusing voice more authority. “They’ve been told” invokes children being told by a teacher, or those dependent and of limited authority by those in authority. The omission of the agent in this passive clause signals the unquestionable dominance and supremacy of the unnamed accuser. This authority speaks on behalf of the British people, as it condemns the “insult to thousands of Brits”. The British people (also embodied in the British Medical Association) are implied to speak up for themselves. The location from which they speak (“Most condoms **here** are at least 6 ¼ ins long”; my emphasis) is implicitly ‘our’ country, or place (‘here, where we live’). The othering “they” thus is again opposed by an, in this case implied, “we”.

The news story narrates the mythical tale of a bantering, virile people that beats an impotent, if bullying opponent who is, literally, a joke. The tale can again be identified as a variation of Lule's Hero myth. On a second-order semiological level the analogy between the myth of the funny virile Britons standing up against an impotent as well as bullying EC and the concept of strong, funny Britishness being alien and superior to an unfunny, oppressing EU creates, again, the myth of British-European alienness and the superiority of the British people.

The non-mythical (non-lasting) news story – allegedly endangered steam trains

The third of the Euromyths which are considered in this article differs significantly from both previous ones in so far as it did not last: The story of the alleged danger to traditional British steam trains through European regulation did not achieve longevity.

The news story "Brussels law could derail steam trains" appeared in the *Sunday Times*[16] on 3 July 1994 (p. 7). In contrast to the previous two, this article enacts the essential rituals of objectivity – inverted pyramid, presenting evidence, offering quotes from conflicting sources – without incorporating practices such as comical language which are uncommon for the news genre. Furthermore, the *Sunday Times* news story does not pitch Britain against the EU, or the British people against European bureaucrats. Although it berates the "Eurocrats", it also quotes the chairman of the Association of Railway

[16] The difference of this sample text to the previous two cannot be explained by the different newspaper type. Although this story was published in a broadsheet newspaper, whereas the two previously analysed texts appeared in tabloid newspapers, its essential characteristics do not differ much from a similar article published by a tabloid newspaper ("Steaming trouble: 'Following these rules would turn all our engine boxes into boxes on wheels'", *Daily Mail*, 4 July 1994).

Preservation Societies who "blames the British government" for not being informed and prepared to act in time against the planned EC regulation.

This Euromyths news story could be read as an example of what Fairclough describes as 'stage 4' of the dialectical-relational approach to CDA: "Identify possible ways past the obstacles [to overcome the social wrong]" (Fairclough, 2016, 104). Relevant in regard to his example, Fairclough describes how a strategy of politicization counteracts the depoliticization of consensus politics (ibd.). In the case of the steam train-Euromyth the undisturbed news genre can be understood as counteracting strategy: reporting that strictly limits its language to the genre rules frustrates the transformation of a news story into an identity myth that overrides critical fact-checking, as observed in the two previous Euromyths news stories.

Discussion: The persuasive power of elite populism

The analyses of two of the three sample texts found a double-myth structure. As news stories, they both narrate a variation of Lule's Hero myth. The banter and sexualised language identify the 'hero' as the witty, defiant, virile British people standing up against a weak, bullying, unfunny EU. Barthes' theory of myth as second-order semiological system, as a "metalanguage" (Barthes, 2013, 224), allows to show how the Euromyths create, through analogy, the myth of British difference and superiority to the EU. The myth constructs this antagonism as "eternal", because, as Barthes observes, the metalanguage of myth is "eternalizing" (262).

I suggest that the dichotomy which the Euromyths construct between Britain and the EU is populist as defined by Mudde: "*an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the*

corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (2004, 543). Mudde describes populism, referring to Freeden's analysis of nationalism (Freeden, 1998, 750), as "a 'thin-centred ideology', exhibiting 'a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts'" (Mudde, 2004, 543). As a "thin-centered" ideology, populism can be combined with other ideologies. In the present case the populist myth of the witty, feisty Brits standing up against a corrupt EU combines with Euroscepticism.

Mudde further contends that populism is moralistic and normative (ibd.). The core concept of the populist ideology, the people, remains vague and unreal: "the people in the populist propaganda are neither real nor all-inclusive, but are in fact a mythical and constructed sub-set of the whole population" (546). I argue that this mythification of the populist ideology removes it from the actual, historical-political debate. The myth of the feisty, witty Briton to whom the EU is essentially alien is "depoliticised speech" as Barthes described it: "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (Barthes 2013, pp. 255–256). At the same time, it overrides any concern for factual correctness on the first, the mere language level.

The concrete British identity myth realised in the Euromyths news stories is reminiscent of P.G Wodehouse, an author who is generally deemed to be "quintessentially English" (e.g. McCrum 2002; Tharoor 2002; Rees 2013), and part of "a defining nineteenth-century narrative of modern Britishness" (Morra, 2014, 23). The farcical tone in Wodehouse' stories, which were popularised in Britain in the early 1990s through the TV series "Jeeves and Wooster" with Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry in the title roles, could have been a model for the comical tone in the Euromyths news stories. The depicture of Englishness by P.G.

Woodhouse is also distinctly elitist as the story of a rich man and his butler whose wealth allows for an idle life unconcerned with the constraints of ordinary people. Through this intertextual connection (Fairclough, 2003, 47), the populist British identity myth as construed in the Euromyths news stories recreates the nostalgic farce of an upper-class Englishman.

An echo of Woodhouse has also been observed in Boris Johnson's language (Wordsworth, 2018). Furthermore, Johnson, according to several accounts (Helm, 1995; Gimson, 2007, 98–99; Purnell, 2011, 115–128; Fletcher, 2016), initiated the false, absurd reporting of EU regulations that resulted in the Euromyths. His lie on a campaign bus, which became iconic for the Brexit referendum, links to the myth of British defiance against a bullying EU: It draws on the many Euromyths news stories published over nearly three decades, repeating their mythical claim that Britons can resist the EU because their wit and virile energy makes them eternally superior to a weak and laughable organisation, which is deeply alien to British nature.

Conclusion

The British vote to leave the European Union can in part be understood by how Europe and the EU were narrated in Britain over the last thirty years. This article analysed the linguistic strategies that evolved with the so-called Euromyths and went on to influence the way how the Leave campaign argued for Brexit. The Euromyths are an important case study because they remained persuasive although their untruths and misreporting were continuously exposed. This article draws on the theories of Lule and Barthes to explain the persistent influence the Euromyths exercised through their use of mythical narrative and metalanguage. The two sample articles that spread lasting falsehoods (ban of bent cucumbers and regulation of condom sizes) were shown to break the rules of the news genre. In contrast, the sample

text that stated a non-lasting falsehood obeyed the limits of the news genre. These different discursive strategies appeared to entail different propensities to mythify the news story. However, more extensive analysis of Euromyths will be required to confirm that indeed the recontextualization of other discourses, such as an informal, conversational discourse, within a public political news discourse furthers the mythification of news stories.

This article argues that the Euromyths proved harmful to the political debate in Britain not because they spread lies, but because they transformed news stories into a myth of eternal, natural alienation between Britain and the EU. As myths they sidestepped the need for fact-checking and thus for critical political debate.

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